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Makati goes loco over coco-diesel

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JUST when the country faces a fuel crisis due to soaring global oil prices, Makati City tries out a coconut-based alternative fuel that promises to be more cost efficient and environment friendly.

Coco methyl ester (CME) or coco-biodiesel, derived from coconut oil, will be tested for three months on government vehicles and jeepneys in the city.

"This is one thing that was unnecessarily delayed, " said Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay Wednesday.

He added, "For so long, our campaign has been to apprehend smoke-belchers, which is not preventive. [The use of coco-biodiesel] meanwhile is preventive because the gas that will be used will not cause pollution,"

Makati City is the fourth city in the country to adopt the use of coco-biodiesel under the 2-year-old Clean Cities Program of the Department of Energy (DOE),

the United States Department of Energy (USDOE), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The same partnership has introduced biodiesel use in the cities of Marikina, Davao, and Baguio.

"This is a mitigating measure. It addresses our objective of energy independence and fuel diversification," said Clovis Tupas, chief of DOE's Alternative Fuel Division.

Tests on a Mitsubishi L300 van and a passenger jeepney showed that the use of a B1 blend of coco-biodiesel- or diesel with 1 percent CME-decreased the level of blackness in the vehicles' emissions.

Initially, the L300 van was fed with commercial diesel and showed a 3.15 opacity level, below the accepted level of 2.5 under the Clean Air Act.

Opacity is the measurement of the blackness of smoke emitted by vehicles.

After being blended with one percent coco-biodiesel, the van's opacity level went down to 1.72.

Meanwhile, a smoke-belching jeepney was initially found to emit a dangerous 9.07 grade exhaust on the opacimeter. After feeding it with the B1 blend of coco-diesel, its exhaust showed a 5.71 opacity reading.

"The emission level would go down the longer coco-biodiesel is used in a vehicle," said Dean Lao Jr., market development manager of Chemrez Incorporated, one of the two private manufacturers of CME.

He explained, "It is like purging or cleaning up the exhaust."

Coco-biodiesel currently has three blends, depending on the amount of CME mixed with diesel.

The B1 variety is a one percent blend, the stronger B10 has 10 percent blend. A B100 meanwhile is pure coco-biodiesel.

These are available in select gasoline stations in Metro Manila and some provinces.

For immediate results, Lao suggested that a first-time user initially fill up with the B10 blend.

Later, when the engine is already "clean," he may start using the B1 blend.

But there is a downside.

The B1 blend, now available in five Flying V gasoline stations in Metro Manila and select Seaoil stations, costs about P65 per liter, or more than double the current price of diesel which ranges from P29.40 to P31.

A B100, now available in one-liter bottles in some 192 gasoline stations and 110 direct selling outlets of manufacturing firms, sells at more than P120 per liter. About 10 coconuts would be necessary to make a liter of B100.

But, Lao said, the use of CME would be more cost-efficient for motorists, as it would give vehicles better mileage by a "conservative estimate" of 10 percent.

For instance, vehicles could add 50 kilometers more to the average 500 km mileage on a full tank of commercial diesel, if they ran on B1 blend. This would translate to roughly P85 in savings on fuel costs.

As he welcomed the fuel alternative, Binay sought the guarantee of sustainable distribution of CME products.

"Hopefully the government could study the use of coco-biodiesel so it will become viable, successful, and acceptable... not a haphazard implementation. There must be stable supply, and the prices must not be too high," said Binay.

The Philippine Coconut Authority said the country, which currently produces 70 million liters of B1 per year, has a sustainable capacity to produce coco-biodiesel. Chemrez, for instance, would increase production next year.